

Telecommunications Relay Services

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) permits persons with a hearing or speech disability to use the telephone system via a text telephone (TTY) or other device. Under Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act, all telephone companies must provide free relay services either directly or through state programs throughout the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and all of the U.S. territories. Businesses, government agencies, family, friends, and employers of persons with hearing and speech disabilities make and receive relay calls everyday.

How Does TRS Work?

TRS uses operators, called "communications assistants" (CAs), to facilitate telephone calls between people with hearing and speech disabilities and other individuals. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules require telephone companies to provide TRS nationwide on a 24 hour-a-day, 7 day-a-week basis, at no extra cost to callers.

Conversations are relayed in real-time and CAs are not permitted to disclose the content of any conversation. Relay callers are not limited in the type, length, or nature of their calls.

What is a TTY (Text Telephone)?

TTYs are also called text telephones. TTYs have a typewriter keyboard and allow persons to type their telephone conversations via two-way text. The text is read on a lighted display screen and/or a paper printout on the TTY.

7-1-1 Access to TRS

Just as you can call 4-1-1 for information, you can dial 7-1-1 to connect to relay service anywhere in the United States. 7-1-1 makes it easier for travelers to use relay because they do not have to remember relay numbers in every state.

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What Types of TRS Are Available?

There are several types of TRS available, depending on the particular needs of the user and the equipment available.

Text-to-Voice TRS - This type of TRS uses a CA who speaks what a TTY user types, and types what a voice telephone user replies. The first step of this type of TRS call is the TTY user's call to the TRS center. This is functionally equivalent to receiving a "dial tone." The caller then gives the number of the party that he or she wants to call to the CA. The CA in turn places an outbound voice call to the called party. The CA serves as the "link" in the conversation, converting all TTY messages from the caller into voice messages, and all voice messages from the called party into typed messages for the TTY user. The process is performed in reverse when a voice telephone user initiates the call.

Voice Carry Over - Voice carry over (VCO) TRS enables a person who is hard of hearing, but who wants to use his/her own voice, to speak directly to the receiving party and to receive responses in text form through the CA. No typing is required by the calling party. This service is particularly useful to senior citizens who have lost their hearing, but can still speak.

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Hearing Carry Over - Hearing carry over (HCO) TRS enables a person with a speech disability to type his part of the conversation on a TTY. The CA reads these words to the called party, and the caller hears responses directly from the other party.

IP Relay - IP Relay allows people who have difficulty hearing or speaking to communicate with anyone in the world through an Internet connection. IP Relay is accessed using a computer and the Internet, rather than a TTY and a standard telephone line. This type of relay service is not required by the FCC, but is offered by several TRS providers.

Speech-to-Speech Relay - This form of TRS is used by a person with a speech disability. A CA specially trained in understanding a variety of speech disorders repeats what the caller says in a manner that makes the caller's words clear and understandable to the called party. No special telephone is needed for this option.

Video Relay Services - This type of TRS enables individuals who use sign language to make relay calls through CAs who can interpret their calls. The caller signs to the CA through the use of video equipment and the CA voices what is signed to the called party and signs back to the caller. This type of relay service is not required by the FCC, but is offered by several TRS providers. This option is helpful for people who use American Sign Language (ASL), and for people who cannot type on a TTY easily, such as children who are ASL users.

Spanish Relay Services - Telephone companies must provide interstate (between states) relay services in Spanish. While Spanish language relay is not required for intrastate (within a state) relay service, many states with large Spanish-speaking populations already offer this service on a voluntary basis.

One-Line Captioned Telephone - One-line captioned telephone service uses a caption telephone that looks similar to a traditional telephone but also has a text display. This phone allows the user, on one telephone line, to speak to the called party and to both listen to the other party speak and simultaneously read captions of what the other party is saying.

The captioned telephone user dials the number of the person he or she wishes to call – not the number of a TRS provider (or the 711 access number). The captioned telephone user is then automatically connected to a specialized TRS facility. The facility connects the captioned telephone user's line to a second outgoing line from the TRS facility to the called party. Unlike "traditional" TRS where the CA types what the called party says, the CA instead repeats or re-voices what the called party says and voice recognition technology automatically transcribes the CA's voice into text, which is then transmitted directly to the user's captioned telephone. The captions appear on the captioned telephone nearly simultaneously with the called party's spoken words.

Two-Line Captioned Telephone - Two-line captioned telephone service uses two separate telephone lines to enable a user to use one line to speak and listen to the called party the same as with any voice telephone call, and the other line to receive text of what the other party is saying via the relay provider. The user dials the number of the called party on one line, and the telephone automatically connects to the relay provider on the second line. No relay number is necessary. Because the user and called party are connected on the same phone line, the user can take advantage of features such as call waiting, *69, and call forwarding, and also use the telephone to call 911 directly.

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Don't Hang Up!

Some people hang up on relay calls because they think the CA is a telemarketer. If you answer the phone and hear, "Hello, this is the relay service. Have you received a relay call before?" Please don't hang up. You are about to talk to a person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, or has a speech disability on your phone.

More Information on Telecommunications Relay Services

To learn more about TRS, visit the FCC's Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb. If you have questions, need assistance on other disability issues, or if you would like to receive free information about disability issues on a regular basis via e-mail, contact the FCC's Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau at fccinfo@fcc.gov.

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